

NEW YORK MIINING DISASTER

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Translated by Philip Gabriel

They blew out their lamps to save on air, and darkness surrounded them. No one spoke. All they could hear in the dark was the sound of water dripping from the ceiling every five seconds.

“O.K., everybody, try not to breathe so much. We don’t have enough air left,” an old miner said. He held his voice to a whisper, but even so the wooden beams on the ceiling of the tunnel creaked faintly. In the dark, the miners huddled together, straining to hear one sound. The sound of pickaxes. The sound of life.

They waited for hours. Reality began to melt away in the darkness. Everything began to feel as if it were happening a long time ago, in a world far away. Or was it happening in the future, in a different far-off world?

Outside, people were digging a hole, trying to reach them. It was like a scene from a movie.

A friend of mine has a habit of going to the zoo whenever there’s a typhoon. He’s been doing this for ten years. At a time when most people are closing their storm shutters or running out to stock up on mineral water or checking to see if their radios and flashlights are working, my friend wraps himself in an army-surplus poncho from the Vietnam War, stuffs a couple of cans of beer into his pockets, and sets off. He lives about a fifteen-minute walk away.

If he’s unlucky, the zoo is closed, “owing to inclement weather,” and its gates are locked. When this happens, my friend sits down on the stone statue of a squirrel next to the entrance, drinks his lukewarm beer, and then heads back home.

But when he makes it there in time he pays the entrance fee, lights a soggy cigarette, and surveys the animals, one by one. Most of them have retreated their shelters. Some stare blankly at the rain. Others are more animated, jumping around in the gale-force winds.

Some are frightened by the sudden drop in barometric pressure; others turn vicious.

My friend makes a point of drinking his first beer in front of the Bengal tiger cage. (Bengal tigers always react the most violently to storms.) He drinks his second one outside the gorilla cage. Most of the time the gorillas aren’t the least bit disturbed by the typhoon. They stare at him calmly as he sits like a mermaid on the concrete floor sipping his beer, and you’d swear they actually felt sorry for him.

“It’s like being in an elevator when it breaks down and you’re trapped inside with strangers,” my friend tells me.

Typhoons aside, my friend’s no different from anyone else. He works for an export company, managing foreign investments. It’s not one of the better firms, but it does well enough. He lives alone in a neat little apartment and gets a new girlfriend every six months. Why he insists on having a new one every six months (and it’s always exactly six months) I’ll never understand. The girls all look the same, as if they were perfect clones of one another. I can’t tell them apart.

My friend owns a nice used car, the collected works of Balzac, and a black suit, a black tie, and black shoes that are perfect for attending funerals. Every time someone dies, I call him and ask if I can borrow them, even though the suit and the shoes are one size too big for me.

“Sorry to bother you again,” I said the last time I called. “Another funeral’s come up.

“Help yourself. You must be in a hurry,” he answered. “Why don’t you come over right away?”

When I arrived, the suit and tie were laid out on the table, neatly pressed, the shoes were polished, and the fridge was full of cold imported beer. That’s the kind of guy he is.

“The other day I saw a cat at the zoo,” he said, opening a beer.

“A cat?”

“Yeah, two weeks ago. I was in Hokkaido on business and dropped by a zoo near my hotel. There was a cat asleep in a cage with a sign that said ‘Cat.’ “

“What kind of cat?”

“Just an ordinary one. Brown stripes, short tail. And unbelievably fat. It just plopped down on its side and lay there.”

“Maybe cats aren’t so common in Hokkaido.”

“You’re kidding, right?” he asked, astonished. “There must be cats in Hokkaido. They can’t be that unusual.”

“Well, look at it another way: why shouldn’t there be cats in a zoo?” I said.

“They’re animals, too, right?”

“Cats and dogs are your run-of-the-mill-type animals. Nobody’s going to pay money to see them,” he said. “Just look around you—they’re everywhere. Same thing with people.”

When we’d finished off a six-pack, I put the suit and tie and shoebox into a large paper bag.

“Sorry to keep doing this to you,” I said. “I know I should buy my own suit, but somehow I never get around to it. I feel like if I buy funeral clothes I’m saying it’s O.K. if somebody dies.”

“It’s no problem,” he said. “I’m not using them anyway. It’s better to have someone use them than to have them hanging in the closet, right?”

It was true that in the three years since he’d had the suit made he’d hardly worn it.

“It’s weird, but since I got the suit nor a single person I know has died,” he explained.

“That’s the way it goes.”

“Yes, that’s the way it goes,” he said.

For me, on the other hand, it was the Year of Funerals. Friends and former friends died one after another, like ears of corn withering in a drought. I was twenty-eight. My friends were all about the same age—twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Not the right age to die.

A poet dies at twenty-one, a revolutionary or a rock star at twenty-four. But after that you assume that everything is going to be all right. You’ve made it past Dead Man’s Curve and you’re out of the tunnel, cruising straight for your destination down a six-lane highway—whether you want to be or not. You get your hair cut; you shave every morning. You aren’t a poet anymore, or a revolutionary or a rock star. You don’t pass out drunk in phone booths or blast the Doors at four in the morning. Instead, you buy life insurance from your friend’s company, drink in hotel bars, and keep your dental bills for medical deductions. That’s normal at twenty-eight.

But that was exactly when the unexpected massacre started in our lives. It was like a surprise attack on a lazy spring day—as if someone, on top of a metaphysical hill, holding a metaphysical machine gun, had sprayed us with bullets. One minute we were changing our clothes, and the next minute they didn’t fit anymore: the sleeves were inside out, and we had one leg in one pair of pants and the other in a different pair. It was a mess.

But death is just that. A rabbit is a rabbit whether it springs out of a hat or a wheat field. A hot oven is a

hot oven, and the black smoke rising from a chimney is what it is—black smoke rising from a chimney. The first person to straddle the divide between reality and unreality (or unreality and reality) was a friend from college who taught English at a junior-high school. He'd been married for three years, and his wife had gone back to her parents' house in Shikoku to have their baby.

One unusually warm Sunday afternoon in January, he went to a department store and bought two cans of shaving cream and a German-made knife that was big enough to lop off an elephant's ear. He went home and ran a bath. He got some ice from the refrigerator, downed a bottle of Scotch, climbed into the tub, and slit his wrists. His mother found his body two days later. The police came and took a lot of photographs. Blood had dyed the bath the color of tomato juice. The police ruled it a suicide. After all, the doors had been locked, and, of course, the deceased had bought the knife himself. But why did he buy two cans of shaving cream that he didn't plan to use? No one knew.

Maybe it hadn't hit him when he was at the department store that in a couple of hours he'd be dead. Or maybe he was afraid that the cashier would guess that he was going to kill himself.

He didn't leave a will or a note. On the kitchen table there was only a glass, the empty whiskey bottle and ice bowl, and the two cans of shaving cream. While he was waiting for the bath to fill, knocking back glass after glass of Haig-on-the-rocks, he must have stared at those cans and thought something along the lines of *I'll never have to shave again*.

A man's death at twenty-eight is as sad as the winter rain.

During the next twelve months, four more people died.

One died in March in an incident at an oil field in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, and two died in June—a heart attack and a traffic accident. From July to November there was peace, but then in December another friend died, also in a car crash.

Unlike my first friend, who'd killed himself, these friends never had time to realize that they were dying. For them it was like climbing up a staircase they'd climbed a million times before and suddenly finding a step missing.

"Would you make up the bed for me?" the friend who died of a heart attack had asked his wife. He was a furniture designer. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He'd woken up at nine, worked for a while in his room, and then said he felt sleepy. He went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and drank it. But the coffee didn't help. "I think I'll take a nap," he said. "I hear a buzzing sound in the back of my head." Those were his last words. He curled up in bed, went to sleep, and never woke up again.

The friend who died in December was the youngest, and the only woman. She was twenty-four, like a revolutionary or a rock star. One cold rainy evening just before Christmas, she was flattened in the tragic yet quite ordinary space between a beer-delivery truck and a concrete telephone pole.

A few days after the last funeral, I went to my friend's apartment to return the suit, which I'd picked up from the dry cleaner's, and to give him a bottle of whiskey to thank him.

"Much obliged. You've helped me out once again," I said.

As usual, his fridge was full of cold beer, and his comfortable sofa reflected a faint ray of sunlight. On the coffee table there was a clean ashtray and a pot of Christmas poinsettias.

He accepted the suit, in its plastic covering, his movements leisurely—like those of a bear just coming out of hibernation—and quietly put it away.

"I hope the suit doesn't smell like a funeral," I said.

"Clothes aren't important. The real problem is what's inside them."

“Um,” I said.

“One funeral after another for you this year,” he said, stretching out on the sofa and pouring beer into a glass. “How many all together?”

“Five,” I said, spreading out the fingers of my left hand. “But I think that’s got to be it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Enough people have died.”

“It’s like the curse of the Pyramids or something,” he said. “I remember reading that somewhere. The curse continues until enough people have died. Or else a red star appears in the sky and the moon’s shadow covers the sun.

After we finished a six-pack, we started on the whiskey. The winter sunlight sloped gently into the room.

“You look a little glum these days,” he said.

“Really?” I said.

“You must be thinking about things too much in the middle of the night,” he said. “I’ve stopped thinking about things at night.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“When I get depressed, I start to clean. Even if it’s two or three in the morning. I wash the dishes, wipe off the stove, mop the floor, bleach the dish towels, organize my desk drawers, iron every shirt in sight,” he said, stirring his drink with his finger. “I do that till I’m exhausted, then I have a drink and go to sleep. In the morning I get up and by the time I’m putting on my socks I can’t even remember what it was I was thinking about.”

I looked around again. As always, the room was clean and orderly.

“People think of all kinds of things at three in the morning. We all do. That’s why we each have to figure out our own way of fighting it off”

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“Even animals think things over at 3 A.M.,” he said, as if he were remembering something. “Have you ever gone to a zoo at 3 A.M.?”

“No,” I answered vaguely. “No, of course not.”

“I’ve only done it once. A friend of mine works at a zoo, and I asked him to let me in when he had the night shift. You’re not supposed to, really.” He shook his glass. “It was a strange experience. I can’t explain it, but I felt as if the ground had silently split open and something was crawling up out of it. And then there was this invisible thing on a rampage in the dark. It was as if the cold night air had coagulated. I couldn’t see it, but I felt it, and the animals felt it, too. It made me think about the fact that the ground we walk on goes all the way to the earth’s core, and I suddenly realized that the core has sucked up an incredible amount of time.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Anyway, I never want to go again—to the zoo in the middle of the night, I mean.”

“You prefer a typhoon?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll take a typhoon any day.”

The phone rang and he went to his bedroom to take the call. It was his girlfriend clone, with an endless clone phone call. I wanted to tell him I was going to call it a day, but he was on the phone forever. I gave up waiting and switched on the TV. It was a twenty-seven-inch color set with a remote control, the kind you barely have to touch to change the channel. The TV had six speakers and great sound. I’d

never seen such a wonderful TV.

I made two complete rounds of the channels before settling on a news program. A border clash, a fire, exchange rates going up and down, a new limit on car imports, an outdoor winter swim meet, a family suicide. All these bits of news seemed somehow connected, like people in a high-school-graduation photo.

“Any interesting news?” my friend asked as he came back into the room.

“Not really,” I said.

“Do you watch a lot of TV?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have a TV.”

“There’s at least one good thing about TV,” he said after a while. “You can shut it off whenever you like. And nobody complains.”

He pushed the “Off” button on the remote control. Immediately, the screen went blank. The room was still. Outside the window, lights in other buildings were starting to come on.

We sat there for five minutes, drinking whiskey, with nothing to talk about. The telephone rang again, but he pretended not to hear it. Just as the phone stopped ringing, he hit the “On” button, as if he’d suddenly remembered something. The picture returned instantly, and a commentator standing in front of a graph gestured with a pointer as he explained changes in the price of oil.

“See? He didn’t even notice that we’d switched him off for five minutes.”

“True enough,” I said.

“Why is that?”

It was too much trouble to think it through, so I shook my head.

“When you switch it off, one side ceases to exist. It’s us or him. You just hit the switch and there’s a communications blackout. It’s easy.”

“That’s one way of thinking of it,” I said.

“There are millions of ways of thinking. In India they grow coconut trees. In Argentina it rains political prisoners from helicopters.” He switched the TV off again. “I don’t want to say anything about other people,” he said, “but consider the fact that there are ways of dying that don’t end in funerals. Types of death you can’t smell.”

I nodded silently. I felt that I knew what he was getting at. At the same time, I felt that I had no idea what he meant. I was tired and a bit confused. I sat there, fingering one of the poinsettia’s green leaves.

“I’ve got some champagne,” he said earnestly. “I brought it back from a business trip to France a while ago. I don’t know much about champagne, but this is supposed to be great. Would you like some? Champagne might be just the thing after a string of funerals.”

He brought out the chilled champagne bottle and two clean glasses and set them quietly on the table, then smiled slyly. “Champagne’s completely useless, you know,” he said. “The only good part is the moment you pop the cork.”

“I can’t argue with you there,” I said.

We popped the cork, and talked for a while about zoo in Paris and the animals that live there. The champagne was excellent.

There was a party at the end of the year, an annual New Year’s Eve party at a bar in Roppongi, which had been rented for the occasion. A piano trio played, and there was a lot of good food and drink. When I ran across someone I knew, I’d chat for a while. My job required that I put in an appearance every year. Parties aren’t my thing, but this one was easy to take. I had nothing else to do on New Year’s Eve

and could just stand by myself in a corner, relax, have a drink, and enjoy the music. No obnoxious people, no need to be introduced to strangers and listen to them rant for half an hour about how a vegetarian diet cures cancer.

But that evening someone introduced me to a woman. After the usual small talk, I tried to retreat to my corner again. But the woman followed me back to my seat, whiskey glass in hand.

"I asked to be introduced to you," she said amiably.

She wasn't the type to turn heads, though she was certainly attractive. She was wearing an expensive green silk dress. I guessed that she was about thirty-two. She could easily have made herself look younger, but she didn't seem to think it was worth the trouble. Three rings graced her fingers, and a faint smile played on her lips.

"You look exactly like someone I know," she said. "Your facial features, your back, the way you talk, the over-all mood—it's an amazing likeness. I've been watching you ever since you came in.

"If he's that much like me, I'd like to meet the guy," I said. I had no idea what else to say.

"You would?"

"I'd want to see what it feels like to meet someone who's exactly like me."

Her smile deepened for an instant, then softened. "But it's impossible," she said. "He died five years ago. When he was about the same age you are now.

"Is that right?" I said.

"I killed him."

The trio was just finishing its second set, and there was a smattering of halfhearted applause.

"Do you like music?" she asked me.

"I do if it's nice music in a nice world," I said.

"In a nice world there is no nice music," she said, as if she were telling some vital secret. "In a nice world the air doesn't vibrate."

"I see," I said, not knowing how to respond.

"Have you seen the movie where Warren Beatty plays the piano in a night club?"

"No, I haven't."

"Elizabeth Taylor is one of the customers at the club, and she's really poor and miserable."

"Hmm."

"So Warren Beatty asks Elizabeth Taylor if she has any requests."

"And does she?"

"I forget. It's a really old movie." Her rings sparkled as she drank her whiskey. "I hate requests. They make me feel unhappy. It's like when I take a book out of the library. As soon as I start to read it, all I can think about is when I'll finish it."

She put a cigarette between her lips. I struck a match and lit it for her.

"Let's see," she said. "We were talking about the person who looked like you."

"How did you kill him?"

"I threw him into a beehive."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Yes," she said.

Instead of sighing, I took a sip of whiskey. The ice had melted and it barely tasted like whiskey anymore.

"Of course, legally I'm not a murderer," she said. "Or morally, either."

"Neither legally nor morally a murderer." I didn't want to, but I reviewed the points she'd made. "But

you did kill someone?"

"Right." She nodded happily "Someone who looked just like you."

Across the room a man let out a loud laugh. And the people around him laughed, too. Glasses clinked. It sounded very far away but extremely clear. I don't know why, but my heart was pounding, as if it were expanding or moving up and down. I felt as if I were walking on earth that was floating on water.

"It took less than five seconds," she said. "To kill him."

We were silent for a while. She was taking her time, savoring the silence.

"Do you ever think about freedom?" she asked.

"Sometimes," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Can you draw a daisy?"

"I think so. Is this a personality test?"

"Almost." She laughed.

"Well, did I pass?"

"Yes" she answered. "You'll be fine. Nothing to worry about. Intuition tells me you'll live a good long life."

"Thank you," I said.

The band began playing 'Auld Lang Syne.'

"Eleven-fifty-five," she said, glancing at the gold watch on her pendant. "I really like 'Auld Lang Syne.' How about you?"

"I prefer 'Home on the Range.' All those deer and antelope."

She smiled again. "You must like animals."

"I do," I said. And I thought of my friend who likes zoos and of his funeral suit.

"I enjoyed talking to you. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I said.